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ABSTRACT

Noting that a major issue in education today is the concern about students' ability to read critically and to solve problems, this paper describes an analysis of five texts focusing on reading and learning in the content areas to determine what they had to say about critical reading and strategies for teaching critical reading--specifically, whether current texts treat critical reading as a skill or a process. The five texts discussed are (1) "Reading Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers," by Burmeister; (2) "Reading Instruction through Content Teaching," by Cheek and Cheek; (3) "Reading Improvement in the Secondary School," by Dechant; (4) "Reading and Learning from Text," by Singer and Donlan, and (5) "Content Area Reading," by Vacca. The first section of the paper discusses the definitions of critical thinking and reading given by each of the authors. The second section deals with the strategies for teaching reading comprehension offered by each text, observing that, in general, critical reading is taught as a subskill of comprehension with appropriate exercises to strengthen the component parts of critical reading. The third part analyzes the texts' content, noting that all writers include critical reading as an aspect of comprehension, agreeing with Vacca that reading is a thoughtful, cognitive process. (HTH)

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DEFINITIONS AND STRATEGIES OF CRITICAL READING AS PRESENTED IN TEXTBOOKS ON READING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTENT AREAS

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONVENTION - PHILADELPHIA, PA., APRIL 17, 1986

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Definitions and Strategies of Critical Reading As Presented In Textbooks On Reading and Learning In the Content Areas

A major issue in education today is the concern about students' ability to read critically and to problem solve. Robert Marquand in an article "Teaching America's Students to Think" (1986) states that today's students know less about what it means to infer, to extrapolate, to build an argument, to form and defend an opinion, to see implications. They are, in short, not learning enough about thinking critically. These skills become more significant as students move from the primary to the secondary grades and on into post secondary education. An area of complaint that one hears from college professors is that their undergraduate and often graduate students cannot think. In fact, I recently spoke with a colleague who asked me what changes I had noticed in the academic problems that students were having. I told him that the problems were the same as they have been for the past ten years; the students can't get beyond rote recall. He said that that was what he constantly had to struggle with. His students are fine if he asks them anything that requires rote memory, but if he goes beyond that they cannot respond.

Where do students learn to be critical readers and thinkers? Usually, in school under the tutelage of their teachers. Their teachers, of course, are trained in colleges of education by their professors. The professors use a variety of techniques to teach, but most use some text as part of the classroom strategy. My purpose today is to share with you what some of the texts in the area of reading and learning in the content areas have to say about critical reading and strategies for teaching critical reading. Do current texts treat critical reading as a skill or process?

The texts that I am going to discuss are: Burmeister, Reading Strategies For Middle and Secondary School Teachers, 2nd Ed., Cheek and Cheek, Reading

Instruction Through Content Teaching, Dechant, Reading Improvement In The Secondary School, Singer and Donlan, Reading and Learning From Text, and Vacca, Content Area Reading.

My analysis will first indicate the definition that the authors use, the strategies that they suggest and then sum by analyzing their approaches to consider whether they view critical reading as a skill or process.

Definitions

Burmeister states that analysis, synthesis and evaluation activities are frequently referred to as critical creative thinking abilities.(p.256) Burmeister defines critical-creative reading and thinking as requiring the skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. "Such cognitive abilities require readers or thinkers to reason using techniques of formal logic or at least to be consciously aware of the thought processes they are using."(p.292) Analysis, according to Burmeister, requires the examination of parts of the whole; synthesis is the act of combining or unifying elements into a coherent whole and evaluation requires the establishment of standards and also a judgment as to the goodness of fit of the idea.(p.292) Burmeister considers evaluation to be the highest level of the cognitive domain. (p.288)

Cheek and Cheek state that critical reading skills represent another level of comprehension skills. They also feel that critical reading skills are possibly the most important and least developed of the comprehension skills.(p.82) The critical reading skills they list include: the ability to interpret propaganda techniques, the ability to differentiate facts and opinions, the ability to use problem-solving techniques, the ability to recognize fallacies in reasoning, the ability to identify relevant and irrelevant information and the ability to determine the reliability of the author. With each skill the writers define

what they mean and provide a sample question.(p.83)

Dechant cites that critical reading involves literal comprehension but demands that the reader evaluates--that is pass personal judgment on the quality, value, accuracy and truthfulness of what is read.(p.268) Complete reading is said to involve four steps: recognition, understanding, reaction and integration.(p.273) The critical reader, states Dechant, reads all materials in a questioning way.(p.269) "He formulates the question clearly, checks the authenticity of the materials, evaluates the author's credentials, looks for errors in reasoning, and develops a sensitivity to the rightness or wrongness of what is presented." (p. 269-70)

Singer and Donlan relate reading acquisition in the content area to systems that underly speed and comprehension. They list the systems as follows:

1. Cognitive-reasoning processes morphemes, semantics, syntactics
2. Word Identification
3. Perceptual Process (processing and differentiation print).
4. General Information or Word Knowledge
5. Visual and Auditory Abilities
6. Attention (automaticity in processing print)
7. Affective and Conative Systems (Attitudes, Values Self-concept) (p. 455-6)

Vacca describes guiding levels of comprehension. He does not refer to critical reading per se. Vacca suggests that one needs to be cautious when looking at reading as a series of hierarchial skills since that might impart the idea that reading is not a thoughtful, cognitive process, but rather a series of individual skill performances.(p.17) "Readers," says Vacca, "respond to meaning at various levels of abstraction and conceptual difficulty."(p.120). The three levels are

literal or reading the lines, interpretive or reading between the lines and applied, reading beyond the lines.(p.120)

Strategies

Each text offers suggestions for teaching reading comprehension. All the texts describe the use of strategies like DRA, margin glosses and study strategies.

Burmeister divides the teaching of comprehension skills into four chapters and suggests specific strategies for each level of comprehension and for specific content areas.

Cheek and Cheek list the skills they feel are needed for critical reading on tables. They define the skills and provide a sample question that would elucidate the skill. Application strategies for teaching the critical reading skills in content areas are provided.

Dechant suggests exercises that classroom teachers can apply in the content areas. His suggestions are similar to Burmeister and Cheek and Cheek in that the exercises offered are brief, content oriented and skill specific.

Singer and Donlan emphasize single and multiple text strategies for the content areas. They demonstrate the DRA more thoroughly than the other authors.

Vacca suggests the use of three level guides to enhance the development of comprehension skills. A series of exercises are presented that teach the critical reading comprehension skills.

In general, the teaching suggestions or exercises presented in all the texts are similar. Cheek and Cheek and Vacca provide broader teaching suggestions in the appendix of their books.

In order to categorize the suggested teaching strategies in the texts I used a model suggested by Bereiter and Bird(1985, p.141) which classifies strategies as exercises, modeling plus explanation and modeling only. These categories seemed

appropriate since exercises tend to be the teaching strategy used most often to teach reading comprehension skills. The two authors(p. 153) suggest that students will not readily acquire cognition strategies by simply imitating models but that students also need direct, explicit instruction in the strategies.

The teaching strategy cited most often in the texts was the use of exercises. Some models are presented especially when discussing Directed Reading Activity, overviews and multi-text strategies.

In general, critical reading is taught as a sub skill of comprehension with appropriate exercises suggested to strengthen the component parts of critical reading.

Analysis

All the text writers include critical reading as an aspect of comprehension. I believe that all the writers agree with Vacca that reading is a thoughtful, cognitive process. However, although we are dealing with a process their suggested strategies are primarily skill oriented. And this is the paradox for teachers of teachers. Can we separate the component parts from the whole? I believe that we can if we consider critical reading a process that integrates a series of skills.

The rationale for including the exercises and models found in the texts is best stated by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Dorn in How To Read a Book(1972, p29). They state that one can become a really good reader only when one has mastered all the initial stages of reading and is ready to move on to higher levels of reading.

Is critical reading a skill or a process. It is a series of processes. "Reading involves a broad array of processes, from sensory and perceptual ones to higher level processes such as reasoning and inference"(Olson, Duffy & Mack, 1984, p.255). Within the processes we can exercise and/or model certain strategies that will help students become more critical readers.

The analysis of the texts suggest that authors of textbooks used to teach reading and learning in the content areas tend to rely more heavily on exercises for teaching critical reading rather than modeling and that there are commonalities of suggestions in each text. Therefore, which text is selected for teaching may not be of great significance.

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